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No Love for Illusion

Alexander Hayden

Virginia Commonwealth University

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No Love for Illusion

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Alexander Hayden,
Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Washington, 2010

Director: Jack Wax
Professor, Graduate School of the Arts Department of Craft/Material Studies

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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These are just a few of the many people that have helped, I could not and would not have been able to do this alone.

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Abstract

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I remember being young and being told that birds had special pads on their feet which prevent them from getting electrocuted when they sit on electrical lines. I was told on a different occasion not to put my finger into electrical sockets, so, one day I tried a key. I do not have special pads on my hands. In middle school science class I explained the fascinating pad theory to my class only to find out that I was wrong, and if I aim to be so serious sometimes, perhaps I could at least be funny.

Preface

"Contemporary artists are not out to supplant recent modern art...they wonder what art might be. Art and life are not simply commingled; the identity of each is uncertain. To pose these questions in the form of acts that are neither art like nor lifelike while locating them in the framed context of the conventional showplace is to suggest that there really are no uncertainties at all: the name on the gallery or stage door assures us that whatever is contained within is art, and everything else is life."

- Allan Kaprow, *Essays on The Blurring of Art and Life*, 1966

It is here where I will start, with words that were written nearly a half-century ago. The irony is that even today, when I should have long moved past or discovered something new, these words still hold true. I question if I really do deviate from this method, from the strictures of this equation.

Lost; Stumblings; Falling

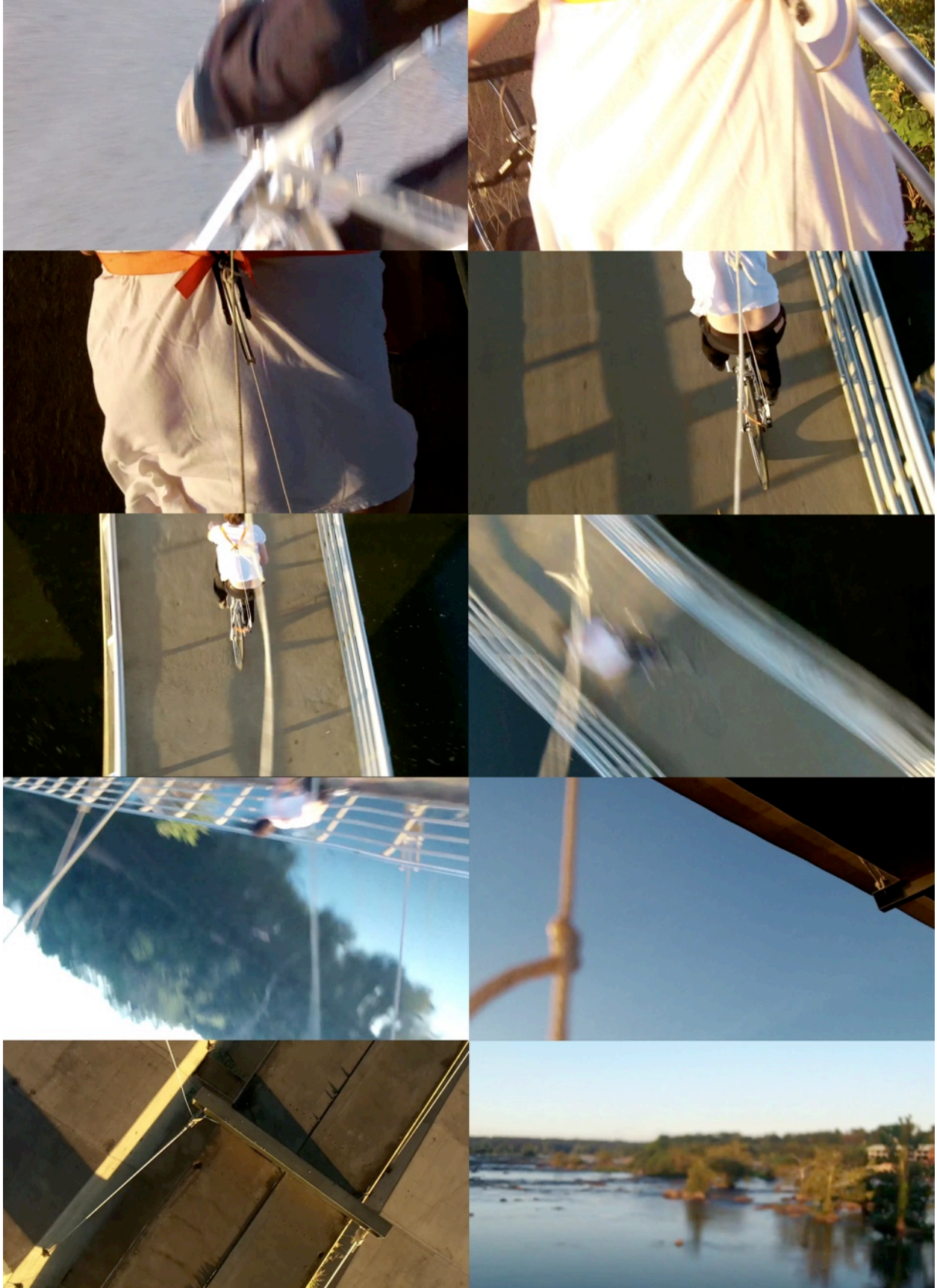
"It's not so much, as so little as to do with what everything is. But it is within our self-interest to understand the topography of our lives unto ourselves. The future states that there is no time other than the collapsation of that sensation of the mirror of the memories in which we are living. Common knowledge, but important nonetheless. As we face fear in these times, and fear is all around us, we also have anti-fear. It's hard to imagine or measure. The background radiation is simply too static to be able to be seen under the normal spectral analysis."

-Reggie Watts, 2012

At the end of July 2011 I packed all the belongings that I could fit into my tiny white car. I set out on the I-90 highway heading east towards the white capped mountains of the cascades that I would soon be passing through. The Olympic mountain range filled the horizon of my rear-view mirror, in front of them the hills of the Seattle skyline. I crossed lake Washington, a long lake that runs from north to south, then wrapping under the tip of lake Sammamish, a narrow lake that also runs north to south.

Arriving early in the morning in Richmond, Virginia I took an off-ramp labeled Broad Street, a street I thought I knew. Unbeknownst to me the circuitous highway crosses this road twice, and so I drove for another five miles in the city before I would reach my final destination. The tallest landmarks were radio towers sparsely placed over the flat hills, my horizon extended only as far as the top of the nearest brick building. As I crept closer to the still sleeping city it became clear that there would be no obvious frame of reference for a while. The James river, a slow river that turns back on itself winding effortlessly through the landscape, was in fact the architect of the city.

From this vantage point the unknown is not across a vast horizon. Instead, traditional modes of knowing through seeing are supplanted only by what I know is on the other side of that wall, that building, the city or perhaps what I think I know. By removing what is assumed to be true: the horizon that grounds us, I push back. I search excitedly for an altered narrative bound up in asking questions. The final outcome is a synthesis of body, intellect and the mechanical operation of a device meant to defy gravity - all playing out within the very real presence of that gravity. In this lays the happenstance of the situation.



Events of Falling Off a Bridge

00:06 Camera shakes, rider in black pants and white shirt can be seen pedaling a bicycle. The bicycle squeaks and rattles.

00:09 Camera stops shaking violently and seems to stabilize over riders back. There is a pulley attached with orange straps over the riders shoulders. Wind rushing becomes audible.

00:11 Camera lifts off from rider. The rider pedals. An aluminum railing comes into the frame.

00:17 Camera weaves slightly above rider. The narrow footbridge the rider pedals across comes into frame. Wind howls.

00:22 Camera continues to lift away from rider. White line running between riders back and camera shakes. Wind noise starts to subside.

00:23 Camera veers to the right colliding with something. And falls. Crash.

00:31 Camera rocks looking sideways at aluminum railing.

00:38 Camera falls off bridge. Footsteps can be heard amongst rope rubbing on rail.

00:46 Camera stops falling looking straight up at bridge. Noise stops.

00:49 Camera floats looking up at bridge.

00:52 Camera rises back up towards bridge. Dripping. Rope can be heard rubbing on rail.

01:04 Camera looks unfocussed out at river.

01:06 End.

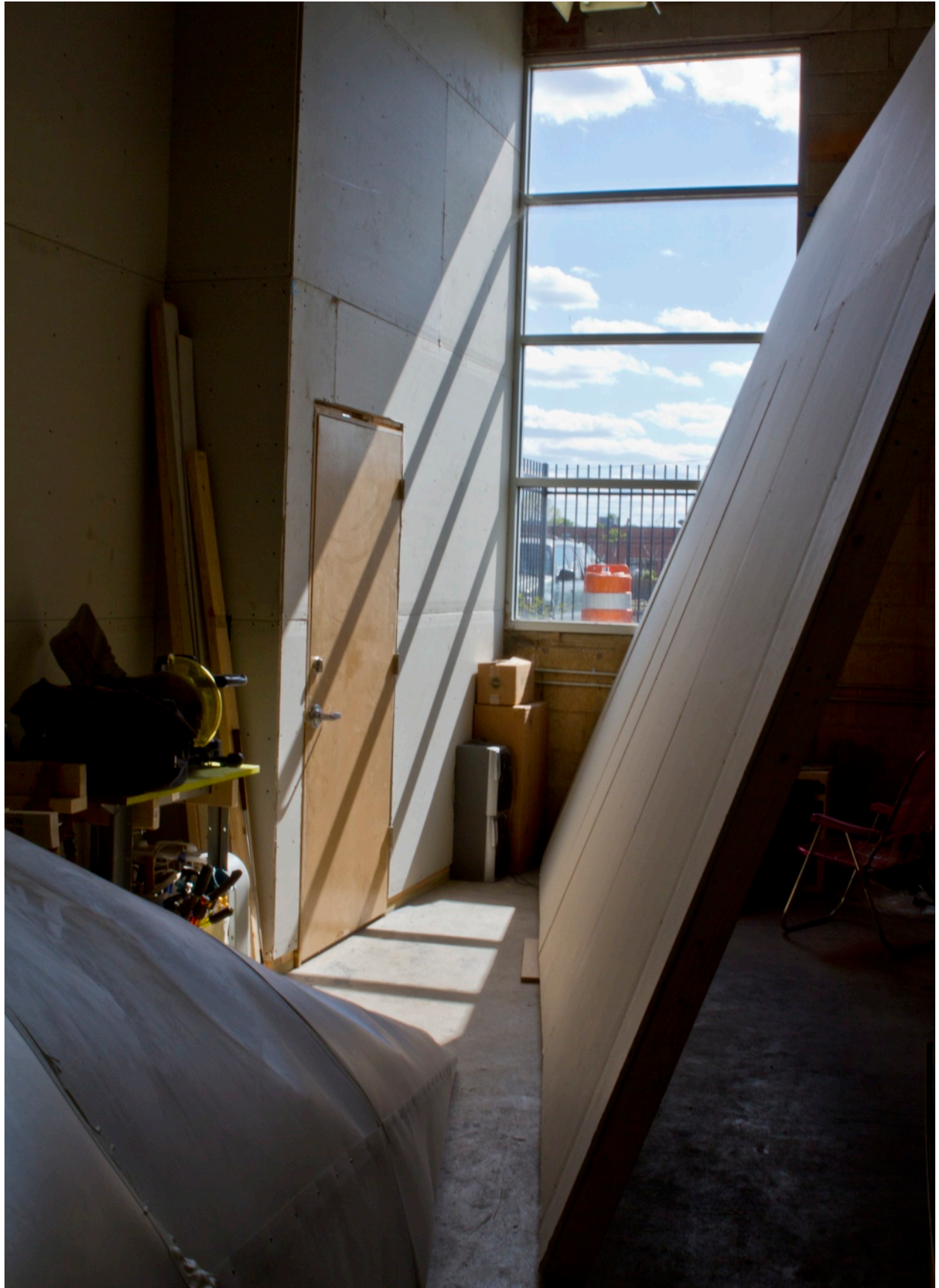
...for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.

-Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1961

Questions that May Lead to Falling Off a Bridge

- What happens when the horizon is eliminated?
- How do I eliminate the horizon?
- What is an image without a horizon?
- What is a video without a horizon?
- How can a camera fly?
- Do I want to see the contraption that flies the camera?
- Does it matter how the camera flies?
- Do I have to fly the camera?
- Where do I fly the camera?
- What does the camera see?
- What does the camera have to say?
- Should it be easy to fly the camera?
- How much control should I have over the camera's flight?
- How long should the camera fly for?
- Is the camera a story teller?
- Am I the camera?
- Is the wind the camera?
- Is the bicycle the camera?
- What is the camera if we only know what the camera knows?

THREE TRACKS FOR AN ANONYMOUS WALL



4:00 am: I lay trying to sleep. The window cracked, the horn of a train sounds.
The four walls that had tucked me in so tightly, gone.
I can hear every hill, every house as the horn bounces over the rooftops.
Should I feel dwarfed by the expansive city? Or feel coddled by a city all
knowing that warm echo.

"Emotions, you know, they're everything and nothing - it's just how I feel."
The words of a friend.

Words will not serve me as they serve so many others. Words have failed me.
I fear that explanation will blow down my house of cards flat,
flat as a white wall.



A Description of Space and Sound

Walking through a doorway into the back of the gallery, turning left there is a wall. It leans into the corner of the gallery. It bends slightly to fit: the bottom edge is lifted, the back edge rests the same on the back wall, flush on one corner. On the outer side a light is plugged in, the chord dangles between the leaning wall and the wall the light is mounted on. Three lawn chairs lean behind the wall, a placard above each embossed with the text "Take a Seat."

Sitting there, a faint crack is visible in the wall along the horizon. Sound emits from the leaning wall that you sit behind.

Track 1:

There is a voice, it's not English, it echoes across the interior, right to left, top to bottom. A French recipe for chocolate cake. It echoes itself, a call and response. Building up soon there is no distinguishing between words. All that is left is the sounds of inflections, mannerisms and the space between you and the white wall.

Track 2:

A train pulls into a station, the voice of a train conductor comes on over an intercom, the train slowly starts to move again. The noise of the freeway fades in. Recordings taken from inside domestic spaces and the surrounding city converge.

Track 3:

Synthesized sounds fill the space. Bouncing. Echoing. Recorded feedback builds then moves across the wall. An electric organ can be distinguished through the clutter of noise. The sound builds constricting the tiny space you sit in, then, releases. The wall recedes away from you. A train horn sounds in the distance.

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is to live. No matter. I have tried. [...] I say living without knowing what it is. I tried to live without knowing what I was trying. Perhaps I have lived after all, without knowing.

-Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 1956

Meeting Bruce

"The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within existing reality."

-Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 2002

Bruce came into this world while I was alone in my studio at 5am, a glass bubble sitting on a stool, a pair of scuba goggles outlined the features of his face. He was presented as a being or entity to talk to, since he did not have a mouth or vocal chords I would speak for him. I sat behind a door and ask the audience to address questions to Bruce.

In the end Bruce failed by most measures, though he started me on two paths, one engrained in a deep interest in the reinterpretation of thoughts and objects, the other an interest in performance completed by the audience.



Questions and Answers, Bruce's Shortcomings

V: Distancing yourself from the work or the viewer seems to be a major function of all of these things. You have removed yourself from it by playing somebody else or literally, like with Bruce, literally having your voice be presented through somebody else. Not even a human entity, I don't know what you would call Bruce, he's a static entity, he doesn't have potential for creative thought. I'm curious about the separation, why you are interested in distancing yourself from the work?

H: A good place to start might be with how I see myself acting in groups of people. It takes me a while to warm up to a group of people in a new situation. At first, I tend to be the quiet one sitting in the corner, observing things... there tends to be a parallel to that in a lot of the work that I do.

It is something that I put out into the world that I would say exists on its own. I'm interested in this mediated relationship where I'm not sitting in the corner observing so much but removed from the situation in a way where I feel comfortable but still have my presence be palpable. This isn't true all the time though, I've started to do some performance, although even in that I'm adopting some sort of persona that protects me, because it's not me that is really up there.

V: Do you think that there are things that you are capable of presenting when you are not the focal point, that you would not otherwise be capable of presenting?

H: There's the obvious answer that a lot of these piece are set in the medium of video or audio or installation so obviously you can't have that sort of presence when you're just talking to somebody like with Bruce. There is this environmental part of it that is highlighting these things that I am drawn to... With Bruce I feel like there is an absurdity, where you are talking to this disembodied head that you know is disembodied and that you know is stupid. Bruce doesn't have any thoughts or feelings. Even though we know that Bruce is stupid, he's just a glass bubble but, we still project this entity onto him. In some ways you automatically project what you think of other people onto them, even with the basic way that you behave with them. So when I'm talking to you, I have this perception of who I think that you are. When you are talking with people that you like and get along with, you talk to them as if you like them and get along with them and you

have this repertoire with them. When you're talking with someone that you don't like you're not projecting this part that's saying you're fun and I get along with you. I want to be talking with you right now. Part of what Bruce was, was trying to figure out what that third person or thing in the room was: the projection. Bruce provided this literal vessel to hold that projection. The downfall with Bruce is that that projection isn't really anything without a counterpart there.

V: You're talking about the way that we tailor the way we interact based on our opinion, our relationship or our thoughts about our audience. With Bruce you had no control over that, you didn't know who your audience was going to be and you also didn't have access to a way to alter Bruce's answers, or the way that Bruce interacted. So there is a distancing of that idea of tailoring the way you speak. Are you interested in maintaining that distance or is that a road block you would like to overcome?

H: In a lot of ways it's a road block that I would like to overcome, it's something I would like to explore and push into. I realize in a lot of things I push into it only as much as I'm comfortable and then I shy away from it. So it becomes this push and pull of how many steps do you take into it before you retreat back, because you don't know where you are at anymore and you do not want to get lost.

V: So with Bruce if you could revisit him what would your goal be? Would it be to alter Bruce in a way that would let him react to his audience or to do away with the idea that you wanted Bruce to react to the audience? Do you want to embrace that thing or do you want to distance yourself from it?

H: I would like to embrace it more. The powerful thing about Bruce for me was creating this opposition. Bruce for me is very different from the Bruce that I presented. He was this physical thing that I would talk to, that I could project my own feelings on. He would allow me to get ideas out in the open that I would be scared of otherwise, or perhaps create a dialog outside my head in a very literal way. He doesn't have any feelings and I can say whatever I want to to Bruce: he could be whoever I wanted him to be. In a way it has an impact because these are still words that I am hearing. To me Bruce was this hero and this villain, he's this way to get out of your head, but you're only out of your head so far.

V: I think its interesting that you said Bruce is a way to get out of your head. It sounds to me like it was the opposite, he was really the critical feedback. If you're trying to get out of your head by asking somebody else something and then all the answers from somebody else come from you. You're not really getting out of your head you're just pushing yourself two steps further than you're comfortable. It doesn't seem like a way to get out of your head it just seems like a way to burrow deeper into your soul.

H: I would agree with that.

V: Although I guess that's just studio Bruce. When you presented Bruce to the audience he was answering questions. Was he answering questions from a script?

H: The audience could ask any questions that they wanted, there was no script for the questions they were asking. There was a little bit of a script that I put in a computer program that would tell me what Bruce needed to say. It was sort of a feedback thing, where whatever you would ask Bruce would get parroted back to you. Which really wasn't very interesting. Whenever we give input into something that is giving something back that is outside of ourselves, that's what I was looking for with Bruce but where he entirely fell short. He couldn't give back anything that was outside of the person talking to him. In a way he really was this entity that he was in my studio but he wasn't somebody that we could buy into.

*The partial transcript of a conversation with a dear colleague
March 8th 2013, 4:31 pm est.*

Ocean Walk Trials:

Another Head in a Glass Bubble

How things work, how the limitations of the body relate to the natural world- the tools we use to explore, to enhance, to alter our nature - use them once to show we can, and again to show we can do it better.

In the Fall I attempted to make a device that would allow me to breath underwater and walk on the ocean floor for a short period. This project now defines itself by the trials and tests that are conducted in search of this realization.





*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again.
Fail again. Fail better.*

-Samuel Beckett, *Westward Ho*, 1983

A Score for a Cyclone

A performance in collaboration with Ander Mikalson.

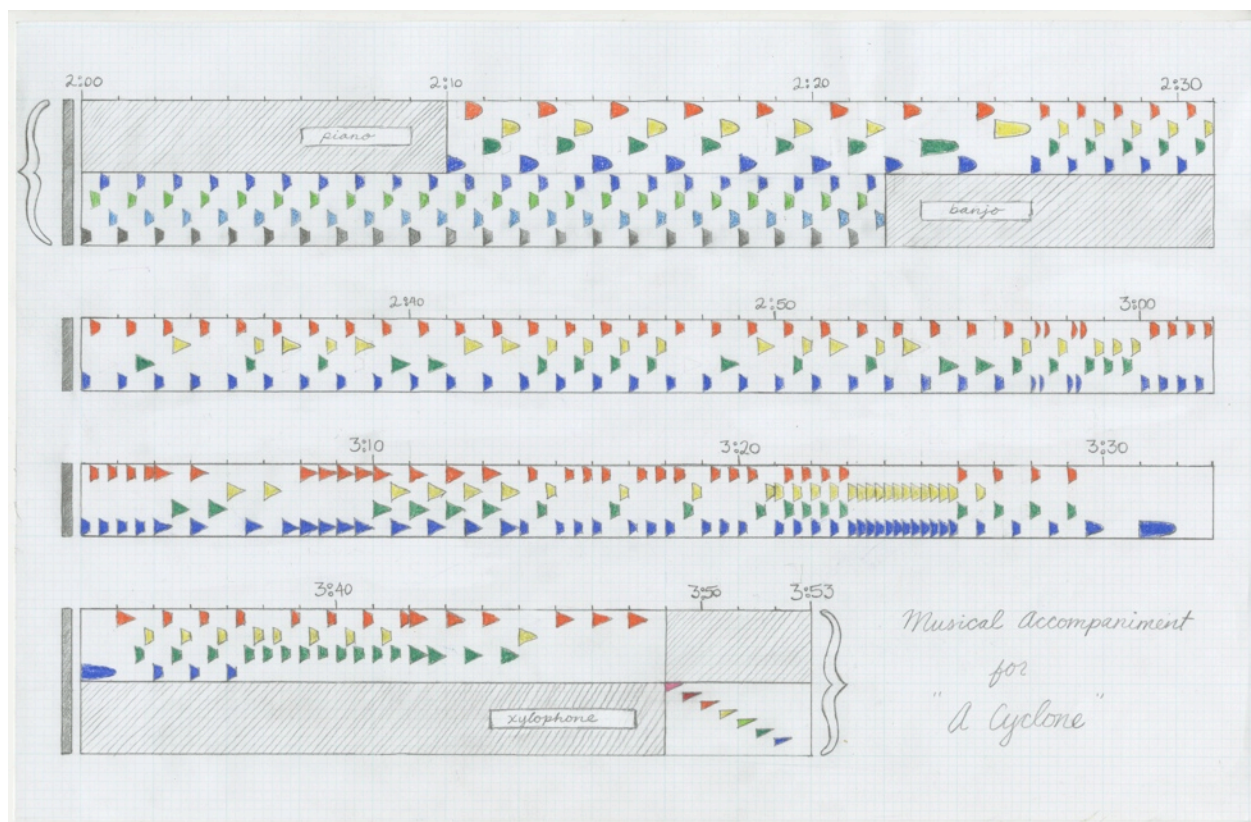
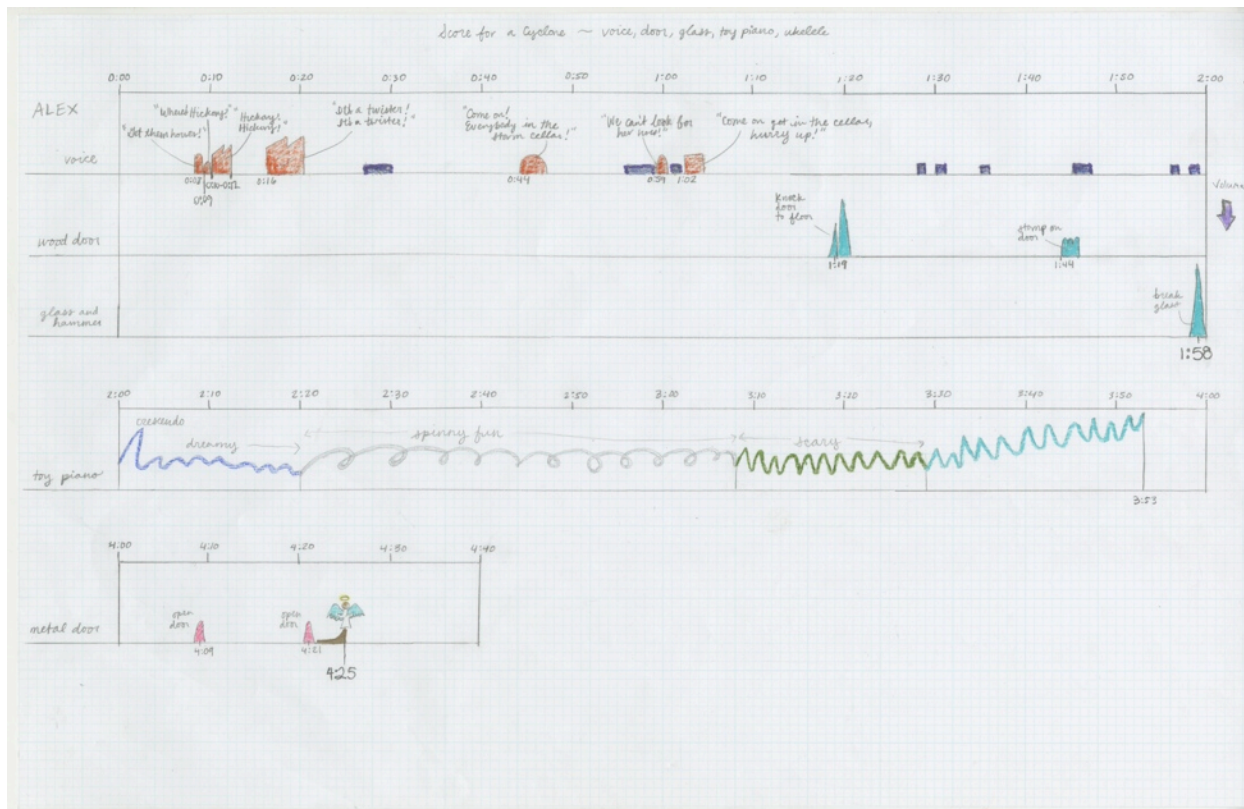
The audience is randomly assigned foley parts to play in a live foley performance of the cyclone scene from the movie the Wizard of Oz.

Precisely written graphic scores are distributed for each instrument. Event times on the scores correspond to a timer that plays over the cyclone video.

Each audience member is coached by the artists as to how to play their instrument and read their score.

The performance begins, all audience members and the artists play parts to complete the foley in real time as the scene plays.





Localized, Synchronous, Transporter

Non-UFO Sighting Ephemera.

A slender man in a black tuxedo walked into the bar. His white hair slicked back, a neatly trimmed mustache framed a grin. I had seen him before; the shiny wear marks on his cuffs seemed to tell his story as he shot cards from one hand to the other. Fanning the cards for a skeptical group, a young girl picked one, wrote "Kiss Me" across the face of the card with a felt tipped marker and shuffled it back into the deck. I had seen this at least five other nights in that bar; I know how this ends but still I watch. With a final kiss to the deck, he flicked his wrist. The deck of cards flew up striking the ceiling. There, staring back down at us, the Jack of Hearts, clung to the ceiling, "Kiss Me" written across his face.

Here I have just a moment, an insignificant gimmick, which I hold so dear. But the more I think about it, the word gimmick in a way feels cheap. I'm drawn to a character that is out of place - everything is out of place - his clothes, his candor, his age. His presence alone designates the bar as a stage, the patrons an audience. In this setting he defies the logic of conventional happenstance. It's as though he appears and transports us with him.



Misplaced

In late December of 2012 I ran across a video titled *Solo Piano - NYC*, on the New York Times webpage. In it a worn, scarred upright piano had been discarded on a sidewalk in New York City. It was similar to the piano I grew up with in the living room of my parents' house. The piano sits on the sidewalk; a pile of defunct Christmas trees waiting for trash pick-up sets a time, a place, a tone. The video unfolds in stop motion; the cadence is somber and you hear a ghostly piano play softly to shifting frames.

Onlookers and walkers-by look and stop briefly, touch a key then move on. A man stops at the piano and plays, another man stops to listen. A group gathers then disperses. Two friends stop, one takes a picture on her phone as the other one plays. The quick phone snapshot. is what strikes me most in this film. It doesn't anger or sadden me, no, but I wonder, I wonder what this means for the time we live in now - how time and space have rendered many of the objects that we used to live with, unlivable. I wonder about the new things we gather around now, our cell phones, our computers in a continuous autonomist fashion, ever more connected through hyperlinks, networks, airwaves.

Here there is a piano, a bygone object, not yet institutionalized solely as an object of the museum. We still know it, we understand its ritual yet we must acknowledge that we have displaced it, its home is shifting.

Over the past year I have managed to collect a few of these heavy beasts. My history with them intimidates me. I learned to play when I was eight, which is to say that I learned that I had no interest in practicing scales or reading music. Perhaps the piano has always intimidated me. But in spite of this, in the face of this, I am intrigued. And now I live with a piano and an organ haunting me, or with me haunting them, we share the same space.

Perplexed, this conundrum helps me to introduce my motives. The things that I find curious in life are those things that get funneled, filtered and fed back on themselves; the things that I re-invent or reorient to my imagination; the worldly can be otherworldly and still find a home in this world, right now. It is not my intention to deal directly in nostalgia, though the viscera of the objects in my work may allude to it. Rather, my intention circles in the realm of our relationship to objectivity. The artist and the audience, the artist and the other.



No Love for Illusion

Installation, Sculpture, Video, Sound, Thesis

A white wall traverses the gallery, entering into a hallway, cutouts mirroring the the doorways of the room lean against the walls.

A video plays, projected from an air conditioning unit behind the wall. A cobalt blue piano sits under the unit elevated from the floor by mirrors.

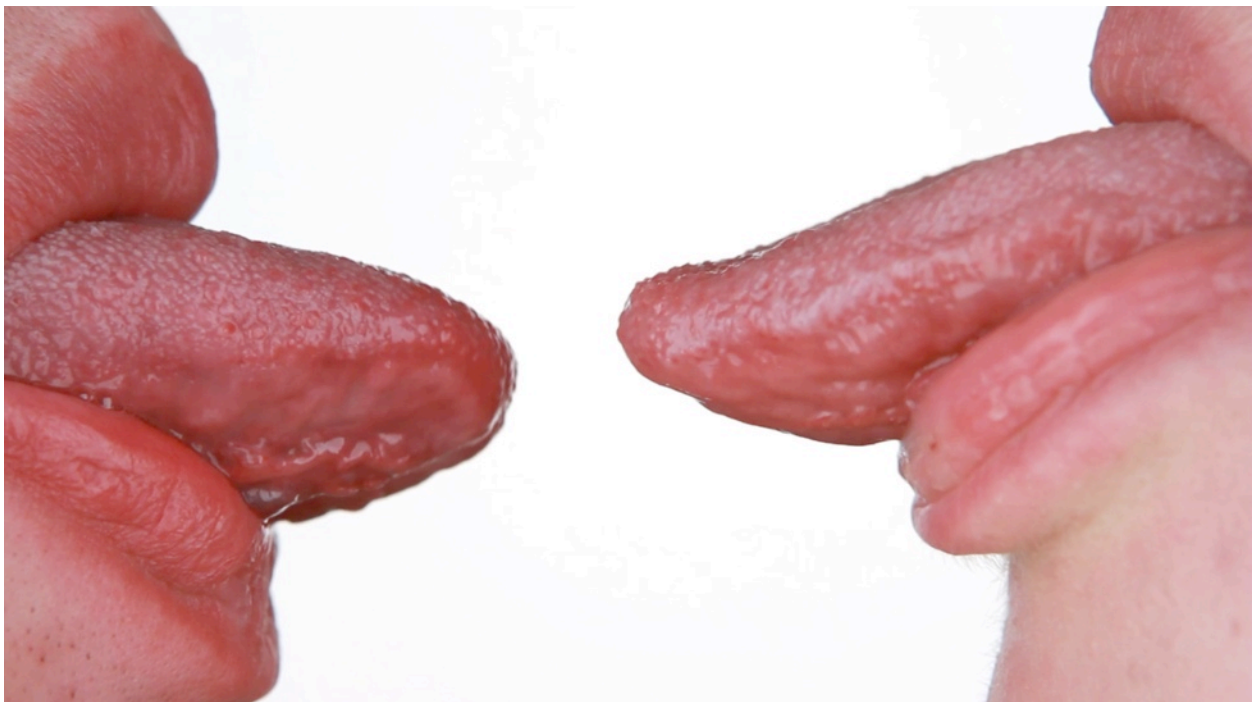
Two mouths enter the frame then exit, they enter again, tongues emerge slowly. Do they touch? No.

Sound becomes audible, it comes on slow. A piano, its not in tune, its not played in time, but it plays a slow progression.

White snow or feathers move slowly across a blurry brick wall projected on the top of the piano.

The shiny tiled floor reflects mirrored tiles along the baseboard which, in turn reflects the black shiny floor back.

Tongues reach for each other one more time then retract, the mouths horridly leave the screen.





Even within the confines of a white walled gallery I search for some sort of uniqueness that I can push up against, something that may help to acknowledge a texture of reality. It is my ambition to morph the space teetering on our own habitual limitations. Embracing the chance of missteps, I hold dear the moments where audience and installation fall out of sync.

"When words alone are no true index of thought, and when sense and nonsense rapidly become allusive and layered with implication rather than description, use of words as tools to precisely delimit sense and nonsense may be a worthless endeavor."

-Allan Kaprow, *Essays on The Blurring of Art and Life*, 1966



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